

Iowa City to the Hindenburg Line

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Iowa City to the Hindenburg Line

The following is the very colorful and unusual story of a group of Iowans serving in World War I. This is their story, nearly as they told it in the diary they kept during their two-year existence as a unit. Our appreciation to the members of S.S.U. 583 and Judge Harold V. Levis for allowing it to be published in the ANNALS. (Roster on page 497)

Dropping the brush with which he was painting a neighbor's chicken shed, Billy Matthes made a wild dash for the train and flung his overalls from the rear platform into the arms of a bystander. Hatless, coatless, collarless and breathless, he seated himself on the back steps of No. 18 as it swung around the bend out of Iowa City. Billy was off to the battlefields of the Great War raging in Europe.

It was June, 1917, a month after the U. S. had declared war on Germany. France had urgently asked our government to supply its army with an ambulance corps to help the Allies cope with the unending stream of wounded men coming from the Western Front.

Colleges and universities throughout the country responded to the call, including the University of Iowa. Billy and other Iowa U. students, and one each from Drake and Grinnell promptly joined the unit which was named "Section S.S.U. 583" of the 165th French Infantry Division. Though transferees and replacements later came from other states, the unit remained composed largely of Iowans throughout its two-year existence.

The contingent boarding the train at Iowa City included University students, Robert Vogt, resplendent in the National Guard uniform he had worn in the 1916 service on the Mexi-

can border, and "Tack" Hammer. Vogt bid a tearful goodbye to his wife and Hammer also held a hurried sobfest with his girl friend.

Allentown, Pennsylvania was to be the first stop for the unit. There they were to be trained for duty overseas. The men felt that they were receiving somewhat of an injustice by being forced to ride a day coach, but at Chicago they were provided with a sleeping car and their estimation of army life rose considerably. Could they have seen eight months in advance their later method of travel, they would have considered their day coach a luxury.

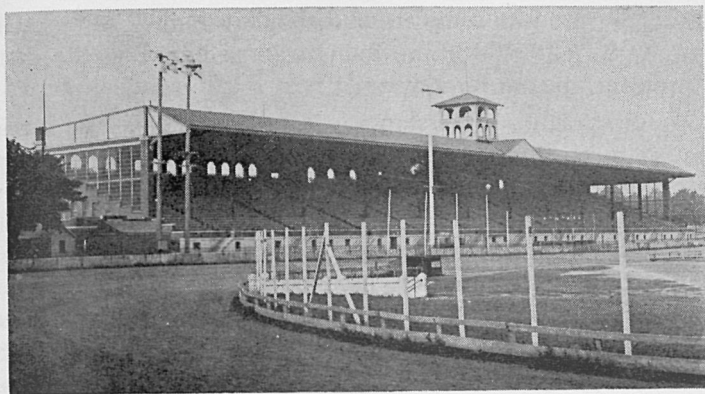
At eleven o'clock, June 22, 1917, the unit was met at Allentown and hustled off to camp in trucks. There they were equipped with two blankets apiece of lace-curtain thickness and an army cot.

The camp was located on the Pennsylvania State Fair ground with its usual race track, amphitheater, horse, cattle and hog barns. The race track became the training ground and the seats were replaced by cots in the amphitheater so it became temporary sleeping quarters for some. Others bravely arranged bunks in the aisle between rows of sheep pens.

Camp-life duties were distasteful to the men at first. Such questions as: "who to salute, and why, officers, sergeants; neither or both?" perplexed them. The orders "fours right" and "company front" might as well have been given in Esperanto. Tom Norris learned the hard way that it was rank mutiny to wear pink shirts and munch ice cream cones in formation.

Anxious to get "over there," Section 583 worked and drilled in the sun for hours, sweating and swearing. A contingent was about to be sent abroad and the unit believed that their ability to do a snappy quick step or to hold a straight section front determined their chances to be chosen. They struggled toward perfection and competition was keen. Finally, Saturday's inspection came, but it meant more Allentown for the Iowans.

Their hopes were raised once more when they were taken on a hiking trip to Betzwood, a little hamlet near Valley Forge. The unit thought this might be one step closer to



FAIR GROUNDS AT ALLENTOWN

France, but their group was split and the Iowans were chosen as stay-at-homes—back to Allentown they went.

Another venture took them to Guth's Station, a wasteland area 20 miles away, and more training. There the men lived in pup-tents which soon became inadequate as the days passed and temperatures dropped. It was then up to the men to provide their own shelter according to their own ingenuity. Some dug caves into dirt embankments and some dug trenches and covered them with the canvas tents. One group of four men in the unit, led by Oscar Eckman, an accomplished carpenter, proceeded to build a miniature house with bunks for two on each side. This was the envy of all, especially after rainy spells when the dug-outs and trenches became slightly soggy.

As part of their training while in this area, the unit was ordered to play war in a cornfield. At 8 a.m. sharp, 50 men would automatically be wounded and weather permitting, would stay wounded until picked up. Half an hour later, 100 to 200 stretcher bearers would swarm over the fields and pounce upon the slumbering figures who were usually half buried in corn stalks. Those who were the lightest and had the less serious wounds would be rescued first. The heavy fracture cases were the least desirable and would often lie for hours before being taken to the first aid station.

On December 7, the unit was ordered back to Allentown, adequate barracks having finally been built there. Days later,

the sailing list was complete and they were on it at last. On January 2, 1918, they were in New York boarding the liner "Carmania," bound for England.

The first night on the ship was a restless scene. The incessant glare of lightbulbs, throbbing engines and the slapping waves were new sensations and prevented sleep. The only relief from the discomfort of that night was the thought of breakfast the next morning—hot coffee and maybe fried eggs. When the 8:00 a.m. rush for breakfast to the mess hall came, they found dirty, under-sized youths dressed in once-white overalls laboring over evil-smelling trays. Breakfast consisted of cold, clammy coffee and oatmeal which looked capable of crawling out of the dish.

Ships' routine and training took up most of their time on the two-week boat trip. The men were lectured on the customs of the people they were soon to meet and the interesting aspects of their new work. During one lecture, Luscombe inquired as to the availability of drinking water at the front, to which the officer replied, "Young man, what in the Hell do you want to do with drinking water?"

Arriving in England, the 583rd went to Winchester by train. After sight-seeing they were shipped to Le Havre in an old vessel, used to transport horses. There they were taken by train to St. Nazaire, Ambulance Base Camp No. 1, on the Bay of Biscay.

The ambulances arrived shortly after by ship. They were four cylinder, sturdy Model "T" Fords on which were attached light, cardboard-like bodies without windshields. Pieces of brown canvas about chin high held up by two straps from the body-top served as some protection from rain and cold.

Regular capacity of one vehicle was three stretcher cases or more if the wounded could sit on the rough benches which folded up when used for the seriously injured. During an attack when the casualties were high, evacuees with minor arm or leg wounds or tear gas victims often rode on each front fender, on the seat with the driver, or in the rear.

The 583rd spent most of February preparing the Fords for the days of war to follow. Finally, all of the cars were shipped away except for one complete set of 20 which was distributed among the unit. Several days were spent learning

the art of cranking and driving the autos and constructing beds in them to accommodate 50 men. These tasks complete, they were ready for a trial run.

The 20 cars were cranked up and they were off. After the first two miles had been covered, the first signal to stop was given and only 10 of the original 20 remained in the convoy. Mechanics were sent out to retrieve them. Nine had merely lost their way and the other missed a turn and landed in a ditch.

The trial run accomplished, the unit set out for Paris and eventually the front. After a series of thrown tires, smashed tail gates, knotted fenders and burning engines, they reached the romantic city, March 13, and took advantage of all it had to offer. A week later, they moved on.



BLUM, HAMILTON, MONK, LEVIS, A. SMITH

Following a short visit in Versailles, Section 583 was turned over to the French army and the 165th Infantry Division. There, the 26-man section was composed of a lieutenant, sergeant, corporal, two cooks, and two mechanics. The remaining men were drivers. The French assigned to the section a lieutenant, sergeant, corporal, and one private who was promptly nicknamed "Army."

The division was in a rest area near Toul and things were quiet at first. The French welcomed the ambulance unit, and the Americans quickly gained respect for their French allies

and were impressed by their bravery and coolness after three years of combat.

On March 26th, 1918, the unit was loaded onto flat cars and transported to the front north of Paris and their first real action. There, they were ordered to evacuate the last of the French Foreign Legion which had been wounded during the bitter combat defending Amiens, from a hospital near Amiens to hospitals further from the line.

The Russian front had collapsed six months before, and during the winter of 1918, all German troops engaged on that front were moved to the west. They were massed on a section between St. Quentin and Cambrai. The German strategy was to break through the allied lines and drive to Abbyville located on an estuary of the Somme River. In so doing they would sever the lines and all land communication between the French on the south and British and Belgians to the north. This was exactly the goal and tactics Adolph Hitler used some 27 years later. He succeeded, but the Germans in 1918 were stopped before reaching the key city of Amiens by the desperate valor of the French Foreign Legion, even though they had broken the Hindenburg line which had been static for nearly a year.

On March 23, 1918, a long range German Cannon nick named "Big Bertha" began dropping shells into Paris. The purpose was to break the morale of the Parisians and it was incredible that a cannon could fire so far. The breakthrough was awesome and demoralizing, but the Legion dug in and held only some 15 miles from Amiens.

The ambulance unit made evacuations to hospitals within 25 to 75 kilometers distance. All of the roads were strange to the drivers and the hospitals but an X on the map. It was their first night-driving experience without lights.

The men rested the following two days—a calm before the storm. Baseball games, French lessons, and trips to see the cathedral in forbidden Amiens served to fill in the time until the division went into the lines. They were finally called to the little town of Boves to the east of Amiens and about three miles from the lines.

As they pulled their convoy over a row of hills overlooking the town, they saw remnants of the British 5th Army lying

scattered about in small groups. The anxious 583rd waited impatiently by a road on a hillside.

Suddenly the sides of the hill, dotted with 1,000 camions and artillery of every size, became active. The Hun, with characteristic thoroughness in seeking out emplacements, unluckily sought this hill as his target, putting the unit under shell fire for the first time. The inexperienced Iowans waited as shells of all calibres whizzed around them.

Ignorant of the danger they were in, they rushed to the crest of the hill to listen to the shells and watch them as they exploded in a spray of dust and a cloud of yellow, sulphurous smoke. Serenely they sat, watching the play of artillery and the work of the Big Berthas. They didn't realize the closeness of disaster until an English labor battalion, tramping immediately past them, found itself scattered about by a high velocity explosive.

* * *

It was late in the afternoon as the section drove into the little, evacuated town of Boves. The sun shone hazily and the men's spirits perked up in spite of the anxiety the new adventure brought. All civilians had been evacuated and an undamaged house became the unit's quarters. A field kitchen was set up and here the men were quartered when not on



BOVES AND THE DIVISION DRESSING STATION

duty. Across the street was a building housing the division dressing station where the wounded, brought in the ambulances from the first aid posts, were examined. They were then evacuated by French personnel in large ambulances to hospitals far to the rear.

Near Boves, the French division was holding a front of some two miles behind a small stream which flowed into the Somme River. Back of the front were three small, ruined villages, Domart, Bertecour and Thezy. The ambulance unit split up into three groups, each going to one of the villages, all of which had a sturdy cellar in which was located a dressing station. To these, the stretcher bearers brought in the wounded and one or more of the ambulances was on duty day and night.

Those on duty at Domart had experiences much the same as at the other two posts. They followed a main road which led through a woods which had the pleasant odor of what they supposed to be some French herb, mingled with the smell of powder smoke. The steep slopes they traveled were scarred with barbed wire and white lines of trenches dug in the chalky soil and pitted with innumerable shell holes. Here and there were small wooden crosses bearing an inscription, "mort pour la patrie," death for the country.

At last they came to the crest of a hill only 300 yards from a blackened mass of ruins which was once the town of Domart. At the start the wounded could only be evacuated at night, as the road from the hill to the town was under enemy observation. The section hurried past two shot-torn ambulances and stopped opposite a hole in a brick wall which lead to a sturdy cellar. Along one side of the cellar floor lay a row of mattresses, salvaged from the ruined houses, on which the stretcher bearers placed the wounded. Shattered arms and legs were splintered and wounds were dressed. There, they lay until darkness descended and evacuations could begin.

Behind the cellar entrance was a courtyard pocked with holes, broken bricks and red roof tiles. In the walls of a barn at one end of the yard, lay a dead French officer lying on a stretcher, his gray, shrunken fingers stiffly outspread from a raised forearm, his clothes bloody, his legs twisted, his face bloated and his blistered skin green.



DOMART

The atmosphere inside the cellar reeked of decay and dead bodies. In a corner, an adjutant grasped a gaping wound on his body. In the dim light lay rows of barely living men with rigid faces swathed in bandages. The wheezing lungs of one was his only sign of life. One man moaned, another vomited.

Suddenly there was a screeching whine which ended in a deafening crash. The cave shook and pieces of brick dropped from the ceiling, but no one was injured.

The wait for the shelling to stop seemed interminable. More to pass the time than anything, the men ate. They tried to read, but uneasiness kept them from concentrating. Suddenly there were more explosions and shocks. Then they felt a prickling sensation in their nostrils. They began to sneeze and the adjutant shouted "Gas." Everyone quickly put on his gas mask and the prickling sensation stopped, but the awkward masks still made breathing difficult. It seemed like hours before they could be removed.

Night descended and it was finally safe to work. The men loaded the ambulances hurriedly with wounded to be taken to Boves. They were to return as rapidly as possible. They re-adjusted their masks and came out of the cellar groping

their way to their ambulances, cranked them up and clambered in feeling relieved to be at home in their vehicles again.

They were slowly feeling their way along the bumpy road in darkness when a blinding flash and a great, hot wind reeled the cars. Pieces of dirt and rock rained down. If any sound preceded the bursting of the shell, it was too intense to be realized. Shells exploded in the sky all around them. For one moment they would be in uniform darkness, then would come a blinding explosion followed by a ghost light. The car was set in low gear and the exhaust pipe at their feet became red with heat, but the motor could not be heard in the din. After speeding through some gas-filled woods, they came to an open field and safety.

The shelling rumbled behind them as they slowed and again heard the pulsations of the motor and the moans of the wounded. Avoiding the French trenches loaded with munitions, soup kitchens, French soldiers moving up to the lines for replacements, and slowing more after cries from the wounded, they reached Boves where the wounded were unloaded and then back again to that sturdy cellar to get more of the casualties.

Within a week the Iowans were hardened to the gruesome sights and sounds of battle. Torn wounds, dripping bandages and gurgling moans no longer upset them. It was their duty to evacuate the wounded, ask as few questions as possible and think not at all. The evening bombardments were no longer fearsome. Sounds of battle were simply incidental to their new life.

On the night of May 23, during an attack at Thezy, several of the ambulance section drove most of the night over a heavily bombarded road evacuating the regiment's wounded. It was then that the section was honored by being awarded the Croix de Guerre. Losh, Dodd, Hamilton, Powers and Randklev personally received the coveted citation.

For the first two weeks at Boves, the unit operated only at night after 10:00 or 11:00 p.m. when the shelling had generally stopped. After that they tried driving during the day. The front had quieted somewhat and no car was bombarded. The only holes in the ambulances were the results of shell fragments or falling bricks and debris near the cellars.

The French lines held and by May the front was quiet. The division was replaced and moved to a rear area for rest and replacements. Section 583 went along and was quartered in a little town named Taisnil. It consisted of two streets, a cafe, a church and a cluster of little homes squatting under the lee of long, grassy slopes where cattle and sheep wandered aimlessly in and out of their scattered pup-tents. The peaceful scene was almost too pleasant to be true. Furthermore, wine was only five francs a bottle.

On June 8th, they left the quiet village. A new German drive aimed at Campiègne, a key city, about 35 miles north of Paris had begun. They had broken through, but using the tactics found to be most effective, the French were advancing to counterattack.

On June 11, three French divisions, including the 165th, advanced on a seven mile front. Expectation ran high in the 583rd for they were to see their first action in the open.

At nine o'clock on June 11, half the cars departed for St. Martin au Bois, the rest following three quarters of an hour later. They had to thread their way through interminable lines of convoys that stretched from Lieuvillers to Montiers. Beyond the latter town the congestion was indescribable. Triple lines of vehicles of all kinds vied with each other for possession of the road. Artillery horses broke into the crowded ranks of marching infantry which in turn were hemmed in by a noisy stream of huge camions gorged with ammunitions. British machine guns were lined in the open, and on the crest of the hill, huge, evil-looking tanks, hideous in their camouflage, were patiently waiting for the order that would send them forward, Indian file.

The crash and thunder of artillery fire seemed to electrify the air. Here was the real thing at last, but as none had pictured it. The noise; the crash of 75s, the boom of 155s, the shouts of men, the hoof-beats of horses, the rumble of trucks, the chugging of motorcycles, the faint droning of airplanes above; struck their ears as harsh, discordant notes. The oppressive heat which seemed to beat down from the above hung like a heavy cloak over everyone. All was mad scramble and scurry!

In St. Martin-au-Bois also, the unit found much scurrying

and scrambling. As the attack was timed for 9:45 six cars were immediately dispatched to the dressing station at Menevillers, which was to be their only post, while the others were getting ready for a steady 48 hour grind at their temporary cantonment in the court-yard of a farm. By half-past ten, the first wounded began to flow in, and ever after there was a steady stream of cars on the road.

At the post, during a few seconds rest while newly-made Boche prisoners reloaded their cars, the men would stand back of the building and watch the panorama. Across the stretch of open field, appeared the black silhouette of the town of Mery already showing fringed and frayed edges. Houses were crumbling as if crushed between unseen hands, and when the steeple of the church was finally shot away, nothing remained but smoking black ruins. Farther off to the right, in the town of Belloy, the French were meeting terrific resistance.

By noon, everything was rolling. The 20 ambulances were all traversing the 30 kilometer run to the hospital at St. Remy. A few remaining civilians met them as they passed through the streets of Lieuvillers, and there were tears in many eyes as the ambulances passed through the town with their loads of wounded, or stopped so that the civilians might give them a drink.

The terrific fighting lasted throughout the day and it was not until the morning of June 13 that the sector was again normal.

A few days afterwards the French division received citations that had been earned in the attack for "successful counter-attack," "pressure on Compiègne relieved," "Clermont saved," "four kilometers won back," "Mery and Belloy taken" . . . a splendid record. The men were proud of them and of themselves, but later those of them who were able to visit the battlefield as a whole and see the aftermath: Ferne Bouchemont with its ghastly orchard, those sloping fields with their riot of color, and the still, blue figures that dotted the slopes, probably tried to figure up the cost—and were aghast.

Two days after the attack, and before the excitement had fully worn off, the section changed its cantonment from Lieuvillers to La Neuville Roye, a little town some five kilometers

nearer the front, but yet unharmed. Retaining perhaps a fifth of its normal population, besides being headquarters for the division, the town was very crowded. Nevertheless, a large manure pile was still unclaimed when Section 583 arrived and it was immediately chosen for their camp. With the kitchen in open air at one end of the pile, their beds in the huge barn at the other end, and with their cars in the street, they were located for the summer.

Here, the men spent 3 lazy weeks. The time was spent leisurely and it went slowly. The men became restless. Then, on August 8th came news of a new attack which extended from Amiens to Compiegne. They were glad that the period of inactivity was at an end.

On the night of August 10th, the section arrived at Moyenville. All was silent, but at 6:00 a.m. a great flash lighted the air. The ground trembled beneath them, and their ear drums seemed to snap. From every part of the town, from all the hills and gullies as far as they could see, the cannons flashed their thunderous roar.

They crawled to the highest points to watch the effect of the barrage, but darkness disclosed nothing but the biggest shells exploding in the fields. They descended to wait until the thunder ceased and the cars on post began to bring in the first wounded.

The French had attacked, and the Germans made no other effort to stop them than to loose great cloud of gas. The ambulances were busier bringing in those overcome by gas than they were bringing in the wounded.

All morning they worked, evacuating the gassed and wounded French, and 20 or 30 German machine gunners who had been left behind. By afternoon, the enemy had retreated nearly ten kilometers and were still retreating, but they had mined and blocked the roads so effectively that the ambulances had great difficulty following.

Soon the advance became so accelerated that the drivers were forced to break their way through the blockades if they were to be of value in the attack.

The ambulance unit followed their division to Orvilles on August 12, only five kilometers from the line. First aid posts had been set up with the 155th regiment at the La Marliere

quarry, the 287th at the crossroads in front of Conchy-les-Pots, and the 154th at Biermont.

The attack was resumed at 11:00 a.m., and that day and the following night, all ambulances were on the road moving the wounded.

At six o'clock that night a huge German shell exploded at the edge of the section's camp and wounded Eckman, Dodd, Kelsay, Shimanek, and "Army." Two days of quiet followed and then tragedy struck again. The Germans, annoyed by the Red Cross Flag which flew over the main dressing station, opened fire on it killing some and wounding many, including Volz and Shultz.

Shortly after this incident, the section received another citation. Croix de Guerre medals were awarded to some of the drivers and the unit had a chance to rest in the peacefulness of a small village.

By August, the Allies were attacking along the whole northern third of the western front, and on August 20th, the division was again ordered to the lines. The unit followed until they approached the Hindenburg Line, the final objective.



AMBULANCES TOWARD THE END OF THE WAR

Many times during the next few days they passed and re-passed over a road that was the former emplacement of the "Big Bertha" whose efforts had put Paris in a state of perplexity. This battle did not produce the casualties as did the earlier battles and soon ended.

It was a wonderful day for the Iowa ambulance unit when

they pulled away from that line and repassed the scenes of the month's adventure. As the kilometers slipped by, scenes of civilization and normal existence came into evidence.

After that, duty was light and what there was became pleasure. The evacuation of sick from the different regiments scattered throughout the surrounding towns offered the means of familiarizing themselves with the customs and influences of the country behind the lines.

The kitchen no longer hampered by the uncertainties of its existence, was able to offer little delicacies which had so long been foreign to their simple tastes. Small luxuries like butter, eggs, milk in their coffee, and biscuits were once again introduced into their menu.

The unit was all too anxious to get home. Part of the way, each driver chose his own road, but soon the rules of convoy driving were in order and with the toot of a whistle, all the wheels began to roll together. The long, smooth stretches and the hills proved too much of a temptation and before many miles had slipped away, competition rose and the ordinarily sedate convoys assumed the appearance of a road race. They safely reached the Lorraine front where soldiers slept in bunks and beer was delivered in trucks. Their spirits were high and their outlook good, but the jinx descended upon them. With influenza raging throughout the division, nearly all of the cars were on duty all of the time. Only during the greater attacks had they been busier.

One of the greatest tragedies of their service with the French was the 583rd's sudden transferral from the 165th division to the 42nd whose section had been recalled to the Argonne. Resenting the change and a bit sad to leave their friends of the 165th, the unit accompanied their new division.

On the 25th of October, they moved to a former German hospital outside of Sugny in the Argonne area. There, they made preparations for another attack to be staged with an attack by the Americans on their right. On the first of November, in spite of the rumor of an armistice, the Iowans heard the roar and rumble of combat once more. All day the French attacked, but the resistance was so strong that only a kilometer was gained. Losses were enormous. The American soldiers, however, had penetrated several kilometers in spite

of the death-dealing machine guns of the enemy. They were still going, so that the next day the line gave way before them. Then they were off.

The 42nd French Division to which section 583 was attached forded the Aisne River which the Germans had flooded to a width of almost a kilometer—Section 583 followed. Through mud many inches deep they splashed and chugged, over bridges erected in the night and through water that came nearly to the ambulance exhaust pipes. Only once in the ensuing days did the French troops catch sight of anything that resembled the enemy.

Section 583 was beside the first American troops they had ever seen in action. They carried their wounded along with their own, for the American heavy ambulances were unable to cope with the roads as the Germans had left them. Rumors of a German surrender were in the air and on November 9th the unit was ordered to leave the front and head for some unknown rear area.

Moving to Chalons on November 11, shouts of "*La guerre est finie*" ("the war is over") were heard. The convoy stopped and the men jumped and hugged each other in excitement. They then proceeded to run to the nearest cafe to buy up their available supply of liquor, but the always foresighted French beat them to it and there was none to be had. Luckily, at Chalons they found an ample supply of cognac which they joyously consumed.

Beyond Chalons, in a small town, the unit celebrated the armistice with four scrawny ducks and two bottles of good wine apiece. They stayed on for 16 days taking various trips to Chalons and nearby sights.

On the 27th day of November, the American ambulance unit packed up and started their slow voyage to Hamburg, Germany, a manufacturing town with a population of about 10,000. The section stayed with the 42nd division there during the winter of 1918. Duty was light and it was a period of restless waiting for the order which finally came in April, 1919, to proceed to the debarkation point of St. Nazaire and home the following June.

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